

Migrant Lepidoptera in Cornwall in August 1976

By BRIAN ELLIOTT*

The family holiday this year was taken on the Lizard Peninsula at Housel Bay, from 19th to 27th August.

A stop at Liskeard on the way there to visit friends revealed the presence of enormous numbers of butterflies, mostly *Vanessa atalanta* L. and *Cynthia cardui* L. One *Macroglossum stellatarum* L. was also seen patrolling along the edge of a wall, flying backwards and forwards, and occasionally settling.

We arrived at Housel Bay on 19th August in the late afternoon and a walk round at dusk revealed little of interest.

A quiet day was spent on the 20th, but at 11 p.m. that night, when driving out of Helston, I saw a large hawkmoth spinning in the road, having presumably been knocked down by the car in front of me. I braked as I went over it and grabbing a torch, ran back up the road, but it had disappeared. From my glimpse of it I came to the conclusion that it was probably *Herse convolvuli* L., though I could not be certain, but I was soon to receive dramatic confirmation of its probable identity.

An easterly wind slowly moderated during the 21st and 22nd, but there were few moths in the static trap and little of interest in the way of migrants except for small numbers of *Udea ferrugalis* Hübn. and *Nomophila noctuella* Denis and Schiff.

By this time, Mr. Barry Goater and his family had turned up at Coverack for their holiday, and on the 22nd Barry found a specimen of *Heterographis oblitella* Zell., when we were exploring together on the coast at Hayle.

On the 23rd, the wind had changed to southerly, bringing a mist in off the sea. Late that night a visit to the static trap at Housel Bay revealed a female *Herse convolvuli* L. and a male *Mythimna vitellina* Hübn., both in fresh condition.

Next morning, the 24th, there was a further *H. convolvuli* in the trap, this time, a male.

The mist came in off the sea all day and it became very humid. As darkness fell, Timothy, my son and I accompanied Mr. Barry Goater to Kynance Cove to run a portable m.v. Immediately after setting up, moths began pouring in. The vast majority were *Agrotis ipsilon* Hufn. which flew to the light in enormous numbers, seriously disturbing other lepidopterous visitors and making observation difficult. In rather smaller numbers were *Autographa gamma* L., many of which were of the small *f. gammina* Stdr. The latter's presence was unfortunate, since at one stage I thought I saw a *Trichoplusia ni* Hübn., but Barry was unable to confirm it. In the midst of this mêlée, *vitellina* appeared at a steady rate, flying up the cliff through the mist and we estimated that we had seen a hundred by 1 a.m. At intervals a *convolvuli* would land on

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the sheet until we had seen six. We also had a surprise when two *stellatarum* arrived. We were not previously aware that it flew at night. One moth we expected to see more of was *Mythimna unipuncta* Haw., but only three came in.

A return to Housel Bay in the middle of all this was most fortunate, since Barry secured a gravid female *Mythimna albipuncta* Denis and Schiff. It was flying to a lighted window.

After packing up at Kynance, we returned to Housel Bay to have a look at the static trap. In and around the trap were a further six *convolvuli* and about 30 *vitellina*. In addition to what we had seen at Kynance was one *Hyles gallii* Rott., one *Uresiphita limbalis*, one male *Heliothis peltigera* Denis and Schiff. One *Mythimna loreyi* Dup. was twice seen round the trap; each time it was disturbed before it could be boxed and it finally eluded capture. At this stage, Barry left for Coverack and after a short rest, I returned to the trap to see if I could find the *loreyi*. By now there were a further 10 *convolvuli*. In addition, as dawn came I found a *Palpita unionalis* Hübn. in the bottom of the trap and one *Euplagia quadripunctaria* Poda on the grass outside it. It was a male in reasonably good condition, until I accidentally trod on it in the night when walking round the trap.

I took the *convolvuli* down to the cliffs to release them and when I threw them up in the air so as to disperse them, they all flew off strongly in a westerly direction though it was perfectly still. Of the *loreyi*, I saw nothing.

As the evening came, Barry and I were in a state of high expectation as we selected a spot to the west of Lizard Point for m.v. and sugar. Unfortunately as it became dark a northerly wind developed. We saw the same species as at Kynance the night before flying downwind. Later, at the Housel Bay trap, *vitellina* was present in smaller numbers and only two *convolvuli*. Next morning the count of *convolvuli* increased to four, but there was a fresh male *Hyles livornica* Esp. present. (Barry took one at Coverack on the night of the 24th.)

On the night of the 26th, my last night, the Housel Bay trap contained even smaller numbers and it seemed that the migration was over. The *convolvuli* count had declined to two, but I was pleased to see a male *albipuncta* in the trap.

Discussion

My total sighting of *convolvuli* was 30. Their relatively sudden appearance in numbers from dusk onwards on the night of the 24th—which was a perfect emergence night—along with the *vitellina*, all of which I saw in fresh condition to the end of my stay, strongly suggests a local emergence. Coinciding with this was an immigration of other species followed by a further movement explaining the fall off in captures of the *convolvuli* and *vitellina*.

I thought the most intriguing of these immigrants to be the *quadripunctaria*. It could have flown into the area during the period of east winds from Devon some days previously.

Though in a locality where it occurs regularly every year (in Devon), I could only find one very worn female on the 19th August. Or, there is raised the possibility of its flapping across the Channel on the southerly air drift of the 24th. One is, of course, assuming a second generation on the Continent in this fine summer. This could well explain the two *stellatarum* dropping on to the sheet that night; they arrived in the dark, so to speak.

I cannot end this article without saying thank you to my wife and sons for allowing me to grossly neglect the principles of the "family holiday", albeit for exceptional circumstances.

ACHERONTIA ATROPOS L., MACROGLOSSUM STELLATARUM (L.) AND EUCOSMA PUPILLANA (CLERCK) IN STAFFORDSHIRE. — In September 1976, two larvae of the Death's Head Hawk (*A. atropos*) were found on separate occasions in a potato field at Hopton, near Stafford; later, a pupa was dug up in an adjoining garden.

I have received many reports of Humming-bird Hawks (*M. stellatarum*) seen in gardens in Staffordshire in 1976, one or two in June, but the great majority in September. One was on honeysuckle in my own garden on 18th September. The number of sightings, spread right across the county, indicates the largest immigration of this species we have experienced since 1947. Several observers have commented that the moths were seen hovering over plants which were not in flower, searching presumably for sources of nectar which in that period of drought must have been in very short supply.

Eucosma pupillana was recorded for the first time in Staffordshire as recently as 1973 when I disturbed one from the foodplant (Wormwood, *Artemisia absinthium*) on waste ground near Burton-on-Trent. The plant has within the last ten years or so become much more widespread in Staffordshire, appearing on waste ground and cleared sites in industrial areas in the north of the county. In one such place, near Biddulph, on 14th July, 1976, I found the moth commonly, two or more dropping out of each plant I touched. The site was near to a disused railway line and this was no doubt the route by which first the plant and then the insect had spread; even so, the comparatively short time it has taken the moth to spread from one end of the county to the other seems remarkable. — R. G. WARREN, Wood Ridings, 32 Whitmore Road, Trentham, Stoke-on-Trent, ST4 8AP.

LAOTHOE POPULI L. IN S. DEVON IN 1976. — Mint specimen in m.v. trap on 19th August, and one month later than any previous year. Earliest capture was on 21st May, 1976, which is normal. Was the August specimen from a second brood? — H. L. O'HEFFERNAN, 3 Coombe Meadows, Chillington, Kingsbridge, S.Devon.